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SUBJECT: ISLAM IN MALAWI: A POST-MALAWI FIVE PERSPECTIVE

REF: 03 LILONGWE 1246 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Pol/Econ Officer Peter W. Lord, reasons 1.5 (b/d).

SUMMARY

1. (S) The June 2003 expulsion of five non-Malawian Muslims suspected of ties to Al-Qaida (AKA the "Malawi Five"), which the press characterized as and most Malawians believe to have been a USG-initiative, came at time when the Muslim-Christian divide was being exploited by politicians in the run-up to the 2004 presidential and parliamentary elections. Though for different reasons, the event evoked fear and anger in both of Malawi's distinct Asian and Black Muslim communities, and in many ways united the two communities through a common anti-U.S. sentiment. Though more challenging in the Asian Muslim community, creating a more positive opinion of the U.S. should be possible through intentional funding and programming to Muslim communities, using local Muslim organizations. END SUMMARY.

A BRIEF HISTORY

The Early Days of Islam in Malawi

2. (U) Islam first made its way to Malawi in the late 1500s through Arab Muslim traders seeking new markets in the African interior via Lake Malawi. Thus, the greater population of Muslims came to live along the lakeshore and on the banks of the Shire River. Cultural practices of certain ethnic groups, such as the Yao, married well with Islamic customs and facilitated the spread of formalized Islam.

3. (U) When Western missionaries began settling in Malawi in the late 1800s, they brought both Christianity and education with them. Most missionaries required that children convert to Christianity prior to attending school, thus many indigenous inhabitants converted to Christianity, especially the Chewa people. With education came economic opportunities and access to the external world.

4. (U) Those who refused to convert to Christianity remained largely uneducated and, therefore, had fewer opportunities for economic betterment. To date, many Black Muslims are still reluctant to send their children to government schools for fear of forced conversion. The legacy of inequitable access to education and, by extension, economic opportunities has led to Black Muslim communities having the highest illiteracy rates in the country.

5. (U) The Asian Muslim population came with the British colonial administration in the first half of the twentieth century. With their international connections and superior access to education and economic resources, Asian Muslims quickly gained an important voice in the Malawian business sector. Many of them are among Malawi's most wealthy individuals.

Islamic Sects in Malawi

6. (SBU) Most Muslims in Malawi are Sunni. The two main "tariqa" ("brotherhoods" or "orders"), both of which find their roots in Sufism, are Qadriyah (or Quadriya) and Sukuti (or earlier on Shadhiliyah). Though both orders came to Malawi from Zanzibar via Lake Malawi, Qadriyah was dominant in the early days. In the 1930's, a reform movement began (Shadhiliyah first, then later Sukuti) that preached against many of the syncretic forms of religious rites of the Qadriyah. The reformists stressed the importance of Arabic literacy for religion and English literacy for secular communication.

7. (SBU) By the 1960's, Asian Muslims in Malawi began funding the construction of mosques and the establishment of schools. Their support went to the Sukuti branch. Today, the newer, more impressive mosques and schools are Sukuti, and the

smaller, poorer ones are Qadriyah. Those Muslim Malawians who have contact with Muslims in other countries (or who have been educated outside the country) are generally Sukuti. The Qadriyah often resent the Sukuti's superior access to resources and education, a sentiment that extends to organizations like the Muslim Association of Malawi (MAM), which is seen as a "Sukuti organization." The very small Shiite presence in Malawi is primarily composed of foreigners.

MALAWI FIVE: THE SPARK OF ANTI-U.S. SENTIMENTS

The Political Context

18. (S) The June 2003 expulsion of five non-Malawian (two Sudanese, two Turkish, and one Saudi) Muslims suspected of ties to Al-Qaida (AKA the "Malawi Five"), which the press characterized and most Malawians believe to have been a USG-initiative, came at time when politicians were using religion as a political issue in the run-up to the 2004 presidential and parliamentary elections. Ten years of Muslim former President Muluzi's administration and the recently-mandated public observance of Muslim holidays gave opposition political groups planks to build campaign platforms against the "Islamization of Malawi." While Muluzi's party and administration were not exclusively composed of Muslims, the message resonated well with opposition party Christian Malawians who saw Asian Muslims gaining economic influence and development projects going to the ruling party's strongholds. Muluzi's party, the United Democratic Front (UDF), which was originally financed by Asian Muslims, won the 2004 presidential elections with a Christian presidential candidate and a Muslim vice presidential candidate.

The Cultural Context: Asian vs. Black Muslims

19. (S) Malawi's Muslim community is by no means monolithic. The largest divide, between Asians and Black Malawians, is based on economic and socio-cultural differences, not religious beliefs. The two communities do not worship at the same mosques or socialize at the same Islamic centers. Largely speaking, the two communities have little personal interaction.

110. (S) The relationship between these two groups, which is important to understanding their distinct reactions to the "Malawi Five," is that of giver and receiver. By and large, within Muslim society, the Asians are the givers, and the Black Malawians are the receivers. While there is little social interactions between the groups, their belief in Islam and observance of the "zakat" tradition (the Islamic custom of giving to those less fortunate) enables a nexus of positive interaction between the two groups and, to a certain extent, creates a bond of loyalty.

111. (S) Several of the individuals in the Malawi Five group served as the functional link between these two communities. The Asians donated their zakat money to the organizations managed by the Malawi Five, and the Black Malawians benefited from the development projects and educational scholarships funded by the Malawi Five's organizations. Both communities viewed the Malawi Five as "local heroes," who gave continually of their time and resources and who served the Islamic community well. More specifically, the Asians saw them as good members of the community and as well-intentioned friends; the Black Malawians saw them as development workers who affected real change in Black Muslims' lives.

Post "Abduction": Asian, Black Malawian Reactions Differ

112. (S) In many respects, the June 2003 expulsion of the Malawi Five united the Asian and Black Muslim communities by removing one of the principal link between them and giving them a common grievance against the U.S. The expulsions evoked anger and fear in both groups, and no Malawian Muslims recognized (or even entertained the thought) that the Malawi Five could have been linked to extremist Islamic organizations. Asian Muslims were angry because they felt their friends had been wronged and scared because they thought if these prominent members of their community were spied on, then any of them could also be subject to international scrutiny. Black Malawians, on the other hand, were angry because the development projects they benefited from ceased and were scared because they thought if influential members of the community could be expelled, then any of them could also be subject to mistreatment, in a manner similar to what routinely occurred only ten years ago during President-for-Life Banda's regime.

Post-Malawi Five Engagement

113. (S) Because of the differing reasons behind their common reactions, post-Malawi Five engagement has required different strategies with the Asian and Black Muslim communities.

Asian Muslims want venues to voice their opinions about the USG's foreign policy in the Middle East and still seek justice for their Malawi Five friends who they perceived to have been unjustly and illegally "abducted" from a country where they were doing good work. Their concerns are not completely unfounded, because the Malawi Five were expelled extralegally by order of former President Muluzi and in defiance of a court order barring deportation. For this reason, there is still a strong and continuing cold animosity toward the U.S. among Asian Muslims.

14. (S) Black Malawians, on the other hand, have been more interested to engage with the USG on Islamic issues, such as the life of Muslims in the U.S. and developing US-Malawi ties between Muslim organizations. Generally speaking, Black Muslims are looking for replacement of the benefits they lost when the Malawi Five were expelled from the country. Focused programming and continued dialogue should go a long way to fostering good relations between Malawi's Black Muslims and the U.S.

15. (S) NOTE: In the wake of the Malawi Five expulsions, post formulated and cleared carefully chosen language and press guidance which expressed support for the GOM's action, and also explained some of the reasons for the expulsions. The statement was especially for use with the Asian Muslim community. However, after local consultations and careful consideration, we determined it would actually be best not to use the statement, as vilifying the individuals or their organizations would not help the USG's cause. The Malawi Five were so highly regarded and their organizations so widely respected that the statement would have likely further damaged the USG's credibility and been misconstrued as a confirmation of the USG's involvement in the expulsions. END NOTE.

MUSLIM PERSPECTIVES ON THE U.S.: USG VS. AMERICANS

16. (S) Most Muslim Malawians, whether Asian or Black, view individual American citizens positively and often report good one-on-one interactions with Americans. Their criticism, especially that of Asian Muslims, is generally focused on the USG and its foreign policy in the Middle East. As most Malawians do not think their own government acts in their best interests, they often make the assumption that the USG's actions and policies are not rooted in American citizens' opinions or political beliefs.

"MUSLIM DONORS" IN MALAWI

17. (S) The only Muslim nation diplomatic mission resident in Malawi is Libya, and continual delays have caused most Malawians to cast a skeptical eye on its promised development assistance. Egypt also has a small diplomatic mission to Malawi. (Most Muslim nations have non-resident coverage from Lusaka, Nairobi, or Pretoria.) However, there are several Muslim aid organizations in Malawi, most of which build mosques and health clinics in Black Muslim communities and fund madrasses and scholarships for Black Muslim children. The larger internationally-funded organizations, like African Muslim Agency (AMA) and Youth Muslim Organization (YMO), also provide scholarships for international study to the brighter students in their madrasses. In fact, some of the leaders in the Muslim Associations of Malawi (MAM), a predominantly Black Muslim umbrella organization, studied abroad in various Middle Eastern countries through such programs. Several MFA officials also attended diplomatic tradecraft courses at the Pakistani equivalent of the Foreign Service Institute (FSI).

18. (S) Local and international Muslim organizations with development and education projects in Malawi do not publicize their programs or coordinate with other NGOs and donors. They are normally active only in predominantly Muslim areas. Often the site of the only mosque in an area, the madrasa compounds are generally open to the surrounding communities for use. Embosfs have visited many sites around Malawi and were warmly received and given free access to all the facilities. In addition, most of the organizations welcomed more involvement with the USG, through both funding and programming.

19. (SBU) The US Mission has in recent years done very little programming through and in support of local Muslim organizations, in part because Muslim organizations have not traditionally responded to proposal requests (even at post's prodding).

COMMENT

20. (S) Malawian Muslims' concerns are not completely

unfounded, and it should be noted that the USG and GOM's maladroitness handling of the Malawi Five incident created many of them. However, fostering a more positive attitude toward the U.S. among Malawian Muslims is by no means an impossible task, especially among Black Muslims. And one of the most effective ways to do that is through focused funding and programming to Muslim organizations working in Muslim communities. Since many local Muslim aid organizations are managed by Asian Muslims and benefit Black Muslims, using these local organizations (both Qadriyah and Sukuti) would be an effective vehicle to reach both Muslim communities. Given previous reluctance to respond to post's proposal requests (whether because of political aversion, cultural differences, or capacity deficiencies), it will require creative thinking and intentional planning on post's part to integrate Malawi's previously ignored Muslim population into regular Mission programs.

21. (U) COMMENT CONTINUED. To facilitate USG involvement in and assistance to local Muslim organizations working in Muslim communities, post suggests the creation of a Muslim outreach fund that enables flexible small-scale funding, similar to the Ambassador's Special Self-Help Program. Such a fund would give post an easy entree to local Muslim communities and would foster goodwill through tangible support. END COMMENT.
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